

1998

# A Journal of Poetry: The War in Croatia

Diana Katarina Matijaš

*Eastern Illinois University*

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## Abstract

A poet must find some sort of ground to stand on and must incorporate what the poet sees into words that can relay a message. The topic becomes the muse as the poet looks for a school of poetry that it can lead him or her to. I chose the war in Croatia as my muse, and looked to it to help me find my way to belonging to the school of war poets and to lead others to the truth about this war, which in turn inspired the poetry that forms my thesis.

The war affected me because I am Croatian. I wrote the poetry because I would like to consider myself a poet. I tried to unify these two aspects of my person in the thesis as a whole.

Perhaps anyone can write poetry, but the challenge is to then rank yourself with your mentors while analyzing your own words. I dissect my work for all readers as I discuss the everyday language and underlying rhythm of my poetry in the introduction to the poetry, which I, in turn, used to report a little piece of history.

I make use of various poetry critics and writers, focusing however on poets of World War II, such as Bertholt Brecht and Nina Cassian, to name a couple, but also considering African and South American writers, such as Ben Okri and Carolyn Forché while analyzing my work in the critical introduction. These writers portray their struggle in the way that I attempt with my work. I incorporated critics, a few which are Philip Booth, Steven Matthews and Anthony Thwaite that share my opinion, or quote other critics that do, of the use of language, subject and sounds to form a poem. I found myself as a writer while writing and believe that at least with my poetry I accomplished what I



had set out to do when I chose to write the collection of poems about the War in Croatia that follow the introduction.

*I dedicate this to all Croats,  
in the hope that their fierce spirit  
will free the truth.*

## Acknowledgements

I thank my parents, Željko and Divna and sister, Ines, for their trust and readiness to help me, and for never letting me feel the distance as far away as I might have been at the time.

I am grateful to my committee, Dr. Peggy Brayfield, Dr. Olga Abella and Ms. Lauren Smith for their constant patience and endurance, which helped me to begin this work and then guided me to the end.

To the veterans, widows and survivors of the war in Croatia, I pay my respects and offer thanks, as without them, I could have never written the poems that follow.

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## Where did I come from?

I think that it is necessary to include a brief explanation of the work that is found on the following pages. I started this work about two years ago with the wish to portray a people and their struggle. I went to what I consider my homeland, Croatia, to get the experience I felt it was necessary to have in order to depict the people correctly while being poetic. What I discovered when I began living here was greater than anything I could ever imagine. The images and stories overwhelmed me. I prepared myself for the worst before I moved to Croatia in December of 1995. I knew that the war destroyed many lives and touched everyone's--those of us living in Croatia during the war and those of us watching it on the news from Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, Pittsburgh, Toronto, Melbourne, Berlin, New Zealand and all the other places Croatian people live in all over the world.

The first time I came into physical contact with the war was in the summer of 1993. I had not been to Croatia for four years before that because of the war. I had desperately wanted to go there when the war started due to a guilty feeling I had about being in America while my friends and family members were being killed overseas. I could not accept that in a civilized society people were killing each other mercilessly while the entire world stood by and watched.

Croatia was not a third world country, it was not a country comprised of tribes and nomads--it was a country like any other in Europe, only it was shrouded under the cloak of communism that the Yugoslav leaders affectionately called Socialism--while making sure that those who had their own opinions about freedom were never heard. I was different than the Croatian kids I knew in the country itself. My father left Yugoslavia so that his children could be raised in a country where we could talk about, at least, what we thought was the truth. He did not want his children to live in a lie--he wanted them to be Croatian--not Yugoslavian--the artificial country created after World War II. When I would come to Yugoslavia I was always told never to speak my mind and to keep my political opinions to myself--and to never, never repeat what I heard in the home, concerning the Yugoslav leaders. I just knew that I felt sorry for my friends and cousins who lived in that country because they thought everything they learned in school about their country and their great leader, Josip Broz Tito, was true.

All of this nonsense came to an end when Croatia decided to break away from Yugoslavia and as a result was violently attacked by the Serbian faction of the Yugoslavian army. This aggression became one of the worst attacks upon civilians in the 20th century. It was a miniature Holocaust against Croats and later spread to Bosnia-Herzegovina where Muslims and Croats were systematically and brutally slaughtered. Watching these events from my comfortable little apartment in Charleston, Illinois only made me angrier. I wanted to go there as soon as possible but the situation was getting worse and my parents forbade me to go. I had to finish college--and if I went to Croatia I might have never come back. The situation was really dangerous and getting more tragic by the day. Croatian towns were falling into Serb hands and Croatian citizens were being slaughtered by the hundreds and I could not bear to watch the news or read the papers for fear of seeing someone I know behind the fences of Serb prison camps or to see the cities I love be decimated. By 1992 the United Nations had become involved and the situation

became somewhat calm, even though the Serbs were holding a third of the country and the UN was in fact protecting them. In 1993 I graduated from college and decided to go to Croatia--with or without the consent of my parents; however my mother, like all mothers who love their children, decided that she would also make the trip with me, figuring that if the war did not scare me then it should not scare her. After all she was born there. My sister was then pulled into the journey, too. My father simply could not go.

In June of 1993 we arrived in Zagreb and realized that we had come into a war zone. Armed soldiers were pacing back and forth on the air port grounds. Our ride into the city was even more intense with tanks lining the highway and UN soldiers all over the city. This time our visit was very different than the ones we were used to having. We had to watch where we were going and could absolutely not travel to the coast by car or train as we had done so many times during our childhood visits because the Chetnik Serb soldiers were holding the territory. They had no regard for the rest of the world--which had recognized Croatia as an independent country in 1992.

Our usual trip to the coast was something I looked forward to most and decided I was going to go, however possible. We took a plane; of course my mother and sister went along. Split and Omiš are two cities which before the war were alive with tourism; visitors from all over Europe came to the beaches and filled our hotels. The war killed everything--people and economy. I could not believe what my friends had turned into--soldiers--not the just in the required army kind--but soldiers defending their cities and actually killing other people. This was the first time in my life that I had come face to face with war.

They showed me their weapons and told me their stories and I felt like I was in a movie...I never thought I would come to a place that everyone else in the world would rather forget. The politics against Croatia were nerve racking. Croatia was not allowed to defend herself thanks to UN mandates being forced upon the country. The people had a minimal source of weapons and had to make their own. The arms embargo was helping kill Croatians and there seemed to be no way out. Serbian forces and their government were blatantly ignoring any mandates or peace treaties proposed by the United Nations and were taking territory regardless of anything the world was saying or threatening. The Serbs really had no claim to any part of the country, but that did not stop them. Being in the country while it was occupied did not scare me nor did it make me wish to go back to America. I felt like I was part of something--my American citizenship was given to me as a birthright but my blood came from Croatia, from the Adriatic coast where all of my ancestors lived and I still had family that lived here. I was never happier and more devastated all at once in my entire life. I came back to a country that was in ruins, where it seemed hopeless to even think about any renovation. My friends in Split and Omiš were on the front lines just a few miles away from us, over the mountains...this summer I experienced what it felt like to be a target. For the first time in my life I was very aware that someone somewhere from the other side would kill me because I was Croatian, for absolutely no other reason--only because that blood in my body is of a long history of pure Croatians and they wanted to destroy all of us. The fear of Death is a very strange thing to have in common with people; we were all the same now--no social class divided Croatians because this fear made us all equal. I came from America, where I never

feared that someone would kill me because of my nationality to a place where that was the only way to feel.

I was most stricken by how normally people behaved. There was a war raging around all the major cities in Croatia but the young people somehow managed to enjoy their time. Of course the people trapped in occupied territories could not brave the streets to go have a cup of coffee--but just a few miles away, in cities not Serb held, life almost went on as usual. This amazed me--people became used to war and lived every day as if it were their last. The summer of 1993 made me realize that I felt more Croatian than anything else. I never had anything against America, in fact was very aware that life in America would logically be better--but logic never really played a role in my life and I had decided that sooner or later I would move to Croatia. I just had to get my Master's degree in the states and then I would be free to move.

My graduate studies had come to an end-- pending my thesis, which I decided to dedicate to Croatia and to the war. Not many people knew much about this war--except for the surface reports being given on world news reports. I took this creative point of view to write my thesis. I moved to Croatia in December of 1995--began a new life with my thesis in mind. For almost a year I just lived here (in Croatia, moving back and forth between Split on the coast and Zagreb, the capital) and could not really write anything--because I was overwhelmed. Too many sad stories and too many tragedies. It became difficult for me to write a poem in which I could portray normal after-war life without being absolutely bitter and angry. It is very difficult to not be angry when people that were thrown out of their homes by Serb forces still cannot go back--when driving through the countryside you see villages bombed to pieces--when you hear stories from survivors of Serb concentration camps. The people that experienced atrocities, helpless in their own homes and their own country all around me were living somehow, normally. The whole world turned their back and I decided to offer what I could so that this war would not be forgotten so quickly and so that other people would feel, while reading my work, how it is to live in a civilized world once war breaks in.

I think that all of my poems could become one. I think that the feeling in all of them is somewhat the same. War does not have a happy ending--as I say in one of my works included here. The feelings all become a blend of desperation, disappointment and a certain sense of hope--which many times did not help. People in Croatia still do not know where their family members are, where their sons were killed and where their daughters disappeared. I tried to do justice to the feelings that people experienced in Croatia during this war and after. I tried to incorporate my experiences--but that does not mean that I am the speaker in the poems. I thought about including more pastoral poetry--but the beauty in Croatia has been here and will be here forever--this war will become a part of history that people will not be able to travel to come and see. I want to add something to that history--though perhaps not even beginning to cover all of the awful crimes against humanity that happened in Croatia--but at least to give one view into the world of Croatian people and how they lived between 1991 and 1997.



## Purpose, Politics and my Poetry

A poet must find some sort of ground to stand on and must incorporate what the poet sees into words that can relay a message. When the poet is watching a country at war, he/she takes words, as opposed to a gun, to defend their country. I found that taking a pen to paper could perhaps serve my purpose as a human and then as a poet. What follows is an explanation of the writing I did between 1994 and 1997 about the war in Croatia that lasted from 1990 to 1996. I hope to clarify why my writing took the direction of standing up for one nation only, Croatia. I intend to show my writing as a kind of journal of events that can be read clearly; not to confuse the audience but to bring them into another world where war took over for six years. In this way I try to free the pain of this war, if only a little, and make it somewhat lesser than it is. At the same time, through my topic, I join the ranks of other *War Poets* like Bertholt Brecht, Peter Huchel, Nelly Sachs and others.

When I began my thesis, I was not prepared for the obstacles that most certainly came my way. I wanted, more than ever, to write extraordinary poetry. I thought that this was the most important thing to keep in mind. However, as time went by I found that writing about war is not so easy. War is centuries old and no matter which way you turn it comes down to death. I made the mistake of thinking too much about my audience, to be more specific, my thesis committee, and soon found that the more I thought about what the audience would think, the more difficult it became for me to write. In the book

Trying To Say It by Philip Booth<sup>1</sup>, he answers Alberta Turner's question of his desired reading audience:

*Whom do you visualize as the reader?*

One person and one person and one person. Never, collectively 'an audience.' Never as I write, editors. But I believe the reader I hope for, reading late by simple light, is bound to be out there: one—or with one another. The person will find the poem if the poem finds the person. Writing, writing, try only to get back, down, and out to what the world of the poem may come to.

The oldest commandment is still first: Honor Thy Subject (78).

I had to re-focus. I had to keep in mind that my reader just might be "reading late by simple light" and that I would not want to frighten him or her. Rather I kept thinking about the truth and spreading it effectively. In my case I was not struggling with my own life, but I was watching a nation struggle to get back on her feet after five years of brutal massacres, rapes, prisoner of war camps and merciless destruction. I had to visualize the reader. I had to keep my subject ever present and clear, respecting it more than the poetry itself. The poetry takes the message to the reader, the lone reader as Booth sees it, but the lone reader that is in the conscious community, the community that is not afraid of the rest of the world.

I think one of the things that most captured my attention and thought was that this nation of Croatia was normal until 1990 and then in a flash, the country was at war—and how could I express this morbid normality of a nation at war? I wanted people to know

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<sup>1</sup> Trying to Say It, Outlooks and Insights on How Poems Happen, is a collection of prose reflections which discuss various ways to help a student or regular reader understand poems and how they become whole.

about and even feel the atrocities this war entailed while at the same time I was trying to be creative; trying to be a poet. So, I had to concentrate, perhaps keeping an underlying sense of hopelessness while depicting everyday events in wartime Croatia. In my short poem, *Close call*, I take an event that should have been more frightening than ever, but was so normal at the time:

I awoke to the doorbell  
ringing me out of my high strung sleep,  
I turned to Esko to tell him—  
fear in my bones  
shook me as he jumped to the window  
to see the MP's—  
looking for his brother,  
the troops await—  
a brief moment of unrest, and they leave,  
his brother's in Germany,  
Esko turns to me  
whispers calmly,  
“the war has begun,”  
and we fall asleep again...

The simplicity of the Military Police coming to the door versus the implications of why they came is what I tried to show here. They came to the door asking for a man's life. The whole idea of the simple events that surrounded the war, or perhaps surround all wars fascinated me. The MP's came and left, and the speaker fell asleep again. She and

her husband returned to their normal life. I tried to incorporate this whole idea of normalcy in the middle of a war as an underlying theme in all of my poems. In *The Gift*, the act of giving a gift, something that we all associate with something happy turns out to be more frightening:

The gift my wife bought for me  
was a pistol  
small with a broken handle,  
not wrapped in the cloth it should be,  
a beautiful and terrifying moment...  
Even the women said  
we would need something if they knocked on the door.

I wanted to avoid shock value or shocking language, not necessarily to the words themselves, but the sounds in the words. Soft sounding words, like the effect of simple events, even though war is the topic, convey happenings that might cause disgust to some but become facts of present life situation to others, as I wrote in *I don't care about the weather*:

When I go to cut the roast pig  
we fired in celebration of your return,  
I notice your disgust at the smell of roasting meat-  
my love what happened in those fields  
who did they make you eat?

Such a vision of man eating another man most certainly cannot be pleasant, but these are the topics that I faced when I decided to take on this thesis. As I entered into the world of

death, because that is the only concrete outcome of war, I had to look to other poets who also dealt with war. I did this partly for inspiration but mostly for support. The topic of war can make a person desperate once she realizes how fragile and limited peace is. Upon reading the poetry of Nelly Sachs<sup>2</sup>, a Jewish poet of the holocaust, I came upon her poem *If Only I Knew* from the collection of Selected Poems: Abba Kovner and Nelly Sachs:

If only I knew  
On what your last look rested.  
Was it a stone that had drunk  
So many last looks that they fell  
Blindly upon its blindness?

Or was it earth,  
Enough to fill a shoe,  
And black already  
With so much parting  
And so much killing?

Or was it your last road  
That brought you a farewell from all the roads  
You had walked?

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<sup>2</sup> A 1962 Nobel Prize winner, Nelly Sachs was born in 1891 and died in 1970. She was born in Berlin to a Jewish family, later emigrated to Sweden and became a poet. She wrote war poetry in exile, but not far from the scene; she identifies fully with the

A puddle, a bit of shining metal,  
Perhaps the buckle of your enemy's belt,  
or some other small augury  
of Heaven?

Or did this earth,  
Which lets no one depart unloved,  
Send you a bird-sign through the air,  
Reminding your soul that it quivered  
In the torment of its burnt body? (59)

Upon reading this poem I realized I was not alone in this world of writing about loss and death. Although I was well aware that hundreds of war poets exist, it was easy to fall into a state of loneliness and solitude. This Nelly Sachs poem, although it joins the school of so many other poems that deal with death, seemed more similar to my poems. In my poem *He's coming home*, it is the speaker's not knowing what has happened, as is the case in the Sachs' poem, that is the basis of the poem. As a poet writing about war, I had to face everything I had seen and heard and then had to keep all of the ugliness in my mind so that in the end I could write a poem about it. I had given myself this assignment and therefore had to complete it.

Anthony Thwaite<sup>3</sup>, in his book Poetry Today; A Critical Guide to British Poetry 1960–1965 quotes A. Alvarez about “the poet's ability and willingness to face the full

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tortured and condemned.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Thwaite, both poet and critic, offers an up to date survey of contemporary British poetry. This is the third, revised version.

range of his experience with his full intelligence” (2). In my case, the intelligence for the poetry is the experience. I did not want to confuse the readers or create some mystic world. I wanted to stay clear of confusing language, while in sounds and inner rhyme I try to portray what are the most frightening and awful things that can happen to a country, family and individual. Perhaps focusing on rhyme and subtle sounds can seem demeaning towards the experience of the people. In the poem *Bad time for poetry* by Bertholt Brecht<sup>4</sup>, included in the collection Poems, I found a stanza that coincides with what I am trying to say: “*In my poetry a rhyme/ Would seem almost insolent to me*” (30). Their experiences were catastrophic for them. These people lost everything they worked for, saw family members and friends murdered in front of them, so I was afraid that my concentration on the soft sounds might take away from the harshness of the events. I had to focus and keep focused on the people; if they had not gone crazy and had learned to deal with the atrocities of war, then I had to write about them that way. In *The Picnic* I depict a scene all too common during this war:

The bread used to smell sweet  
in the heat of the brick stove burning  
until the Chetniks  
cremated their victims in it,  
and the lamb baking warm, soft  
turned to soldier's skin stench

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Thwaite says in the Prefatory Note that he “attempted to follow a course which perhaps I should have followed in the earlier version: that is, if I have nothing to say about a particular poet, I have not said it. Most of us have blank areas or blind spots, and these probably get worse as one grows older. The bibliography contains many more names and titles than are actually discussed” (ix).

<sup>4</sup> Bertholt Brecht was born in 1891 and died in 1956. He was a Bavarian writer who wrote many plays and poetry, beginning immediately after World War I. He escaped from Nazi Germany, lived in Denmark and Finland and ended up in Hollywood, but was soon back in Germany, as he was a strict supporter of Communism. In a short introduction to Brecht's work, found in The Poetry of Survival, about rhyming in poetry, Brecht had the following opinion: “Rhyme seemed to me to be unsuitable, as it easily makes a poem self contained, lets it slide past the ear...” (30).

choking rosemary air,  
homemade wine poured thick red,  
glided long and warm  
down our throats  
until the long sleek silver knives  
they carried spilled our heavy blood  
deep into the ground.

During my writing I also came across the German poet Peter Huchel<sup>5</sup>. Upon reading some of his poetry, I found further affirmation that I was not alone in my use of subtle and soft sounds expressing harsh imagery, as is heard in the following stanza of his poem *Roads*:

Nights with lungs full of smoke,  
with the hard breath of the fleeing  
when shots  
struck the dusk.  
Out of a broken gate  
ash and wind came without a sound,  
a fire  
that sullenly chewed the darkness (67).

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Huchel was born in Berlin in 1903 and died in 1981. He spent much of his life in East Germany, and after 8 years of imposed provincial isolation, because his ideas did not coincide with those of the Party's, he moved to West Germany. He won acclaim only after the publications of his post-war collections: *Poems* (1948), *Highways, Highways* (1963), *Counted Days* (1972) and *The Ninth Hour* (1979).



I became more concerned, as I continued my writing, with the use of language: with the sounds and rhythms of words, and the metaphors that seem to fall into place here. In *Tilt*, I think that the metaphor is quite clear.

...Each of them touches me  
they take turns  
playing their pin ball game.

They all do it the same way  
take hold of my shoulders  
and thrust and thrust...  
Fingers on my breasts,  
grasping at their flippers,  
they count my cries...

Images became an important part of my writing process and I became even more concerned with light language relaying heavy images. The words are those found in our everyday language, on grocery lists or in love letters. In the next example, words like “tomatoes” and “bread” become distorted with the image of a child with a bullet in her shoulder. In *Tomatoes and Bread* a mother deals with the death of her child from a Serb sniper’s attack on a marketplace in Sarajevo:

My sister reminds me of the way I found her lying  
on her side-- my Jasmina and a bag of tomatoes,  
some change in her hand for bread.

Small hole in her shoulder led a path to the base

of her head and on her face no words were pressed  
and I wondered had she thought of her mama the moment she died.

In the poem *My Father* it is a daughter that struggles with the loss of her father:

I couldn't smell the rosemary then,  
only fire burning whatever was in its way,  
and our war began  
all the fathers went to fight  
they all promised to come back...  
But they came  
with bread and cheese and milk and fruit  
and the news  
that my father was a very brave man  
and he managed to stay on the front lines  
the day the sirens didn't stop ringing...

One more example of loss, although it was not death, being described in this “light language” that I have mentioned above, I write about in *I don't care about the weather*:

When I ask you to tell me  
about the night you spent  
in the trenches on the east  
wall of Vukovar  
you talk about the weather.

I don't care if it's raining

or snowing or warm...

I want to know about the war

when you killed the men across the street

and then cried

because they used to be your friends.

I feel your rage only when you sleep

you keep your hands in a strange battle position

or sometimes clutch my hair

and the howling in your breath

makes me insane

when I want to know your nightmares

when you scream whose dying eyes do you see?

I was not interested in the bombings or the action that was taking place, but the effect that it had on the people caught in the battles. The war did not end for them when the guns stopped going off or when the snipers retreated. I think that is an obvious theme that can be seen from the examples I quoted above. The Romanian poet Nina Cassian's <sup>6</sup> poem *I left those walls* deals with the memories and the feelings that follow a war:

I left those walls

smearred with my blood--

it was an atrocious massacre.

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<sup>6</sup> Nina Cassian is a Romanian poet born in 1924 (and as I have not looked her up lately she may still be with us). She can be described as a mythic as well as surrealistic poet. She covers wide territory by focusing on her own experience, offering a constant poetic diary

Now I'm flying over the city  
not like a Chagall bride  
beside her bridegroom, the violinist,  
but like a winged nightmare  
with an entire biography of dirty feathers.

I should have left a long time ago,  
before being exterminated by solitude,  
by the random hatches of lumberjacks  
who cut down men,  
of the cannibals who feast on brains,  
I should have--  
but who knows the limits of endurance'  
We wait, we keep on waiting,  
and the days pass, life passes by;  
the black worms dig their corridors  
in our bones; in our eyes  
light milk gets sour;  
our tongue inflates like a scolding mollusc.

But see, I left that house of the massacre,  
I am a nightmare-bird now;  
everyone hears the beating of my wings,

nobody recognizes me. (101)

For those soldiers who were in the battles, for the women in the rape camps and for the children who watched their elders being slaughtered, the war did not end with the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement, but it flies like Cassian's "nightmare bird" and exists in everyone's minds. I kept this in mind and tried to depict it in my poem *Side Effects*, in which the speaker lives his everyday life through the experiences he had in the War. I had to be careful to realize this theme while using language that walks the reader easily through the battlefields in the speakers' minds.

Thwaite characterizes the work of John Betjeman's <sup>7</sup>(Poet Laureate 1972) saying that the "easy surfaces, lyrical measures or ambling pedestrianism of his poetry move about areas of experience which are not simple at all..." (11). I find myself to be moving "about areas of experience which are not simple at all" while I incorporate the images and language of ordinary "pedestrian" life to express or even suggest a complex and not at all ordinary reality. I find that it is most important to create a scene or vision while using words and sounds as the clear bridge to that picture.

Thwaite further discusses the complexity of poetry when he quotes Philip Larkin<sup>8</sup> as saying that "a good poem is both 'sensitive' and 'efficient'..."(43). I had to create some sort of imaginary world for myself and the audience trying to portray a double image of war and life and how the two collided and had to become one; the whole time trying to remain 'sensitive' to the victim and 'efficient' to the reader. I found that trying

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<sup>7</sup> Thwaite begins his discussion of John Betjeman by describing the Poet Laureate as being "generally acknowledged to have been the most successful in this quaint and archaic office since that of Tennyson. For many years, from his first emergence in the 1930's he had a cult reputation..." (11).

<sup>8</sup> Of Larkin's poetry, Thwaite says the following "The publication of his *Collected Poems* in 1988, adding over eighty poems to the Larkin canon, showed chronologically the curve from prolific adolescence in the 1930's (when he was largely dominated by Auden), through the yearning Yeatsianism that held him until the late 1940's, and then most strikingly the acquisition of his own voice, or voices, until the drought of his later years" (41-42).

to contrive my work and make it fit a precise outline of what it should be only posed more problems. Calculated syntax would be almost an insult to the poetry and moreover to the subject matter. The titles of the poetry may suggest a notion of stepping outside of war: *Picnic, Harvest, Afternoon, Summer Camp, Postman, Tomatoes and Bread, Tilt, Wild Horse*, etc. There are no images of death and destruction in the titles. I chose such titles because of the war, which took place in a civilized society, was much like my titles—unexpected. I threw away many poems because they did not ‘fit’ what I wanted to do. Soon I came to a point where I could no longer write and had to remind myself to stop thinking so much and start observing. I had to fall in love with the words and the images although sometimes they were gruesome. In *Infidelity* the speaker has written off her husband’s maddening behavior as an obsession with the sea:

Her wide bosom kept you sane  
While I hid underground  
and she laughed at me  
with her afternoon tides,  
rolling boldly in,  
not afraid of the air-raids and fires  
raging on the shore,  
showing her strength  
telling you to come to her...

She surrenders herself to the after-war crisis situation that many experienced in their marriages when the soldiers came home:

I see the way you look at her

when we go to the beach,  
you fell in love with her  
while far off on the mountaintops,  
and now I watch you love her.

I could not degrade the situation that many people found their marriages in and had to keep in mind that no one is at fault—that war does not involve just soldiers. War involves anyone found in the country at the time. It is difficult to say who suffered more. I tried to be “sensitive” to those relationships, whether they were between lovers or spouses, and how each individual suffered, each on their own side and perhaps each in their own mind. In *Infidelity* the woman indirectly blames her lack of bravery for losing her husband (figuratively), but would rather owe it to his “infidelity”. The absurdity of the man taking the sea as his mistress equals the absurdity of the wife believing it. This adds to the entire absurdity of all the chaos that this war, all wars, entails and shows what one might do in order to remain sane.

Life during and after war becomes morbidly sane and normal. A major problem is how to deal with children. I often wondered how parents explained to those children who were perhaps four or five, playing with all of the latest toys that the children in America had, too. How did one explain war to them? After all, the last war that hit this part of the world was World War II. All of the other civilized countries in Europe were at peace, only Croatia had a war within its own boundaries. In *How to be Brave* I tried to portray what it might have been like:

...my son ensured me he wasn't scared,  
but such a serious statement of bravery

only made the moment more terrifying.

I knew he was scared

and what could I do?

He was shaking from fear

and as I held him

I felt his heart beating faster than mine

and his serious statement

only made me sad—...

The next morning

I told my son

I had realized

that he was the oldest boy

in the building,

so named him civil commander of the shelter

and told him all he needed to know...

The struggle to remain human and sane and raise a child weighed heavy upon all Croats, and on a broader scale among all people living in on-going wars all over this earth. I wanted to show this notion sensitively in my poetry.

Politics cannot be avoided in my work or stance, although I tried to keep it out of the actual works; when war is in question then politics must follow. Politically, I am what UN representatives would call difficult. After all that I have seen and heard in



Croatia, I cannot say that I would live without bitterness in a community where my neighbor killed half of the village during the war, but now wants to come home. This is a very harsh statement, but I believe it is human nature to feel this way. In America, the Indians were thrown off of their sacred land and the slaves, who were stolen from their homes, cannot be forgotten; to this day descendants of those wronged peoples are trying to get over the pain. In the Holocaust millions of people were killed for simply being Jewish; Europe and America live with it everyday because it was a tragic, horrifying event that cannot be forgotten or lessened. The Jewish community will not allow it to be forgotten. These are only a few of the crimes against humanity that we are surrounded with. I wish to make known what the people in this country went through, not by blame laying, but by simply telling the truth.

Seeing things from the inside gives me the justification of the opinions found in, or derived from, my poems. I believed the facts when I began my work. Villagers and displaced persons, soldiers and ex-prisoners of war, girls, my age and younger, raped and forced to give birth to enemy soldiers' children, all told me their stories. I did not give credence to world news reports that were reporting Croatia as the aggressor because I felt it was time for the truth to be known. I tried to respect the victims and not use them as "stuff" for my poetry. I took from their stories and tried to do them justice. *My sixth son* is a specific incident but it can be applied to all Croatian mothers whose sons went to a war they did not start and only wanted to defend what was theirs:

How do I turn my eyes down when the soldiers come  
to tell me I must give up my sixth son  
to take him to war...

This child has never held a gun,  
in his eyes I have not seen the hate that can kill,  
I cannot give him away.

It was not easy for any Croatian parent to choose between the long awaited freedom for their country and the lives of their sons.

There exists a sadness that cannot be escaped and it looms over all of my work. I try to take the topics of war which are used most certainly all over the world by those who witness the events first hand. The ones who inspired me were mostly World War II poets and a few more contemporary ones. These writers are not interested in lies, but in the truth and finding the best way to spread it. Carolyn Forché<sup>9</sup>, although not a WWII poet, rather a poet writing about Latin America, inspired me most. My writing seems similar to hers or perhaps at least goes in the same direction. While I was writing my own poems, I often looked to her poems for inspiration if at the time I could not motivate myself. After reading her poem *Expatriate* I wrote my poem *Happy*. Her images are bright and exact, however ugly they might be; she created such a vivid picture for me that it made me want even more to focus directly on my people and what they had seen.

Reading the following excerpt from this poem might clarify my point:

The smell of black death as blood and glass  
is hosed from the street and beggar holds  
his diminishing hand to your face.  
It would be good if you could wind up  
in prison and so write your prison poems.

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<sup>9</sup> Carolyn Forché is a Latin American poet. Her writing is often dramatic in a soft-spoken manner, honest and most importantly, sympathetic to the victim.

Good if you could marry the veiled face  
and jeweled belly of a girl who  
cooked Turkish meat...

Istanbul you said, or Serbia, mauve  
light and mystery and passing for other  
than American, a Kalashnikov over  
your shoulder, spraying your politics  
into the flesh of an enemy become real (29).

Her poetry does what I am attempting to do, what Denise Levertov says about Forche's poetry, as quoted in Forche's book, The Country Between Us:

Here's a poet who's doing what I want to do, what I want to see all of us poets doing in this time without any close parallels or precedents in history: she is creating poems in which there is no seam between personal and political, lyrical and engaged. And she's doing it magnificently, with intelligence and musicality, with passion and precision (60).

Forche's poetry contains all sorts of images, and sometimes she bombs the reader with an array of thoughts, but she considers everyone involved. She does not focus so much, from what I have read, upon just the soldiers and battles in her Latin America, but upon those who survived.

It is the victim who remained most important in my work. Once again, I did not want to create a helpless person, but to portray a helpless situation. Barbara Harlow<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Barbara Harlow is a professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University Of Texas at Austin. This book After Lives is

quotes Margaret Keck, in her book After Lives: Legacies of Revolutionary Writing, out of her “Typologies of Activism” where she discusses this “typology of activism”:

...communities are the reporters of solidarity. Solidarity involves a substantive dimension that rights based activism does not: support based on a conviction that those supported are right. Human rights appeals, on the other hand, raise procedural claims: that violations of personhood or of accepted civil or legal norms and procedures are unacceptable regardless of the victim’s beliefs (8).

While perhaps seeing myself as a War poet, I can also find myself within Keck’s idea of being the “solidarity” activist, as my poetry is not about “procedural claims” nor is it a call for “rights” to those on all sides of the war. I am not focusing on anyone else’s suffering other than that of Croatia. When Croatians are the only ones being tried at the Hague tribunal for war crimes, the world sees Croatia as the ‘bad guy.’ What the world may not pay attention to or even know is that the soldiers went to Hague of their own free will; the Serb war criminals are in hiding and refuse to face the warrants for their arrest issued by the United Nations. I remained in Croatia because I felt that I was a part of the community and being a part of the community I wanted to do the people justice. Being on the inside I know the things that I write about. The Serbs in Croatia still have many demands. They don’t want to look bad; they don’t like being called the aggressor. My poetry does not slander them. In *I don’t care about the weather* I relate three common activities the Serb forces practiced:

Do you dream about the headless children,

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study that takes its stance by portraying the lives of three social revolutionaries, Ghassan Kanafani, Roque Dalton and Ruth First, up to their deaths, and in turn discusses the causes and consequences of such assassinations.

the sodomized soldiers or the young women raped  
by your old friends?

One of the most frightening things in this war was that the Serbs living in Croatia took up arms and killed their long-time Croat neighbors and friends. This war was mad and bent on destroying anything Croatian, from churches and children to monuments and battalions. In *Hide and Seek* a mother and daughter hide from the attacking soldiers until they hear:

A Serb shouts from outside  
something about the barn  
and the neighboring house--  
Screaming, somebody is screaming,  
they found the neighbors,  
the Serb soldiers happy now  
they've found someone to kill--

Machine gun's rip bellows  
over the soldier's laughter  
though I hear the neighbors begging  
the massacre begins...

Neighbors didn't have time  
to find a better hiding place--

I had in mind every possible situation and tried to give each type of human relationship, mother-daughter, mother-son, spousal, between lovers, etc. a place in my writing. I kept focusing on the fact that all Croats were important and involved, not just the soldiers and politicians.

Place also became important in my work. One of the greatest tragedies of this took place at Vukovar. In *Stayed Behind* and *My Brother's Hands* I relay events that are tied to Vukovar. This war may be over but Vukovar remains an open wound because the displaced persons have to return and the Serbs that moved into their homes will not leave. Many were killed in the battle for Vukovar. I tried to write for them because it is through watching the victims of this war that I realized how final death is and how unfair it becomes. In the *Picnic* poem it is the village by the sea that is important as the people cannot go freely to their usual picnics and parks by the sea. In *My Father* it is Dubrovnik that is under siege, also one of the great tragedies of this war. This historic city, a tourist attraction, was bombed and destroyed and changed forever. In *Afternoon*, another location is central, as the speaker sits at her window and watches the city of Split:

Diocletian's palace looms anciently  
around the youth of Split--  
many of them hiding in passageways  
and beneath old, heavy stone stairs,  
so the rest of us won't see their eyes  
blood shot and dilating,  
heads bobbing,  
leaning against walls or friends

they don't see me watching  
as they pull down their sleeves  
so no one can see the tiny punctures  
on the inside of their arms--

I wanted to incorporate as many cities as I could throughout Croatia and even Bosnian territory into my work with the poems *Tomatoes and Bread* and *Wild Horse*. Because the war reached every corner of Croatia, and so I started northeast in Vukovar and moved completely south to Dubrovnik, going through Zagreb, Zadar and Split. I emphasized place by name because each major city (and many little villages) had its own tragedy. By naming the cities I thought the poetry would be more real and personal, not just poetry about a war in some nameless place far away. I knew my task was also to make this poetry separate from other war poetry and therefore used the city names.

Harlow quotes one writer, Fawaz Turki, who tries to explain dying for one's country thus: "People who die for the freedom of others are, like women who die in childbirth, difficult to explain except to those for whom they died" (13). It is not "difficult to explain" why people defended their homes or want them back. It is "difficult to explain" why the neighbors took up arms against each other. I relied on the courage of others to tell me their stories. *Tomatoes and bread* and *My sixth son* both convey actual events; the mothers that told me the stories relayed them as if the events had happened only moments before I had come to them. Such people are the ones that I consider courageous. The experience and hardships of those who survived this war gave me the courage to at least write about it, but for their sakes, for the victims.

The whole movement of writing about war is striking. People take for granted the peace that they live in. It is not until war touches their homes that they can know how terrifying it can become and begin to question a purpose, more particularly their own purpose and in my case, purpose as a writer.

As the author of these works, rewriting painful events, I had to take my role extremely seriously. I could not separate myself from the political conditions that surrounded me (and do to this day). I did the best I could to open the political conflict to the world. People should not suffer alone, and as far as I am concerned neither should a country. Human rights were at stake in this war and most authors who write about war and aggression, I think, are faced with the absolute denial of human rights. It is a common topic but one that you can never quite get used to or overcome. It is difficult for the world to become your ally if it is not the truth that is being spoken to the world.

The poetry is the medium for speaking this truth. How does one “speak the truth” with words and images and punctuation? The various unexpected bombings of beautiful coastal cities and mountain villages were a visual paradox. From a distance only the beauty was apparent, but as one moved closer, the ruins would become apparent. By analogy, I used the titles of my poems to act as the distance, and the body of the poems to take the reader closer to the reality. Other movement towards the quiet chaos that I think is a part of my poems is in the punctuation or the lack thereof.

My punctuation seems erratic. In almost all of my poems periods are rare. After writing the poems I added commas and dashes, but am still not quite sure where they really belong. I think my punctuation signals an uncertainty and confusion in the speakers themselves. The lack of commas gives the voice a fast paced out-of-breath



sound, which in some poems perhaps adds to the urgency. The sanity of the speaker's voice in contrast to the incoherence of the punctuation serves a similar purpose, as the titles I previously discussed serve as contrast to the poems. The technique that I tried to stay with was to have no pre-conceived technique. But, I had a technique all the same, albeit subtle in the use of images, place, titles and punctuation, as the quotation below implies. My technique, if it can be so called, developed unconsciously during the writing of the poems. In her interview with Philip Booth, Ms. Turner asks the poet about his technique, and his answer is the standard by which most of my poems were written:

A poem consciously principled belongs to a School before it's begun; or ought to be left to poetry workshops: purely an exercise....

A poet in the process of writing need be no more or less aware of 'techniques' than a ski jumper approaching the lip of a jump...What may once have felt mechanical becomes, in process, organic: his form is an event: an act of intensely concentrated motion both grounded in common sense and defying it.

First courage, then skill, then luck. The luck that courage and skill help make. Worrying about a principle as a basic gravity can only bring the poet down hard; tactics become reflex are what accomplish the leap.  
(Booth 77)

As is seen from my writing, I also use free verse. Although I thought about writing in form (sestina, couplet, etc.), I decided that would not fit my subject matter. Free verse allowed me to do what I wanted and go where I wanted to go with the work. I felt as though the work would be much too contrived if I stuck to a form. While acknowledging

that many great writers from Homer to Shakespeare and after wrote in specific forms and accomplished their tasks excellently, I simply felt that it was not for me.

Ben Okri<sup>11</sup> in his book A Way of Being Free has a vision of what the poet is and what the poet does:

The world in which the poet lives does not necessarily yield up the poetic. In the hands of the poet, the world is resistant. It is only with the searching and the molding that the unyielding world becomes transformed in a new medium of song and metaphor (1).

Okri's vision of the poet is an almost romantic vision (for today's world) but it is a vision that offers the most strength for a writer to go on. I believe that the poet is the medium. I stated that in some ways I was a solidarity activist, but I think that is correct to say that I also act as a medium. Of course any poet writing about history acts as a medium, conveying his or her message to the rest of the world. Writing about war places the writer in the position of story teller/ psychologist. I feel that the story must not further victimize the subject; hence the writer, acting as medium, merely lets its reality speak for itself, through him or her.

The question still remains, only partially answered, of which school of poetry I could consider myself a part. As I previously mentioned, I think I could fit most comfortably among war poets; our common cause is, as I have been discussing all along, truth, although we all have our own versions. It comes again to history, and Okri offers the poet's movement in and around, through and over the movement of humanity:

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<sup>11</sup> Ben Okri is a Nigerian born writer educated in England. He won the Booker Prize for fiction in 1991, in addition to Paris Review Aga Khan Prize for fiction, Chianti Rufino-Antico Fatturo International Literary Prize and the Premio Grinzane Cavour Prize 1994. This collection of writing, A Way of Being Free, is a non-fiction collection of Okri's various poetic and prose reflections on the role of poet to the roles of human beings and society as a whole.

The great tidal crowds of everyday events pour in one direction, sometimes the poet has to move in the other—often moving directly against them, at other times cutting tangentially across the morning waves of humanity. Poets seem to be set against the world because we need them to show us our limitations...(2).

I believe that pushing people to witness and feel the past, as Okri puts it, by being ‘against the world’, to show them what they have done, is a rather important purpose of the poet. Okri’s further discussion and in a sense condemnation of humanity further reinforces the stance of the poet:

If the poet begins to speak of only narrow things, of things that we can effortlessly digest and recognize, of things that do not disturb, frighten, stir or annoy us, or make us restless for more, make us cry for greater justice, make us want to set sail and explore inklings murdered in our youths, if the poet sings only of restricted angles and in restricted terms and in restricted language, then what hope is there for any of us in the world? It is those who are scared of reality, of their own truths, of their own histories, those who are secretly sickened by what they have become, who are alarmed by the strange mask-like faces that peer back at them from the mirrors of time, it is they who resist the poetic (5).

I want those who not only “resist the poetic”, but who resist the truth, to just read my poems, or those of other poets who are battling against history and tradition. I remain constantly loyal to the subject and keeping the subject’s history in mind that.

Steven Matthews discusses poet John Hewitt's<sup>12</sup> use of the subject and history in his book Irish Poetry:

Hewitt argues the socialist historian's case that those 'bystanders accidentally involved' in historical events should be recognized along with those who seem to be the main players, the 'soldier, functionary, rebel'...History itself is made up of different pieces, and the relation of the parts to the whole, as well as the actual coherence of the whole, remains finally unclear (55).

And it is this ambiguity that poses specific problems for writers like myself who are struggling to offer a sense of clarity in contrast to the clouded, manipulated versions of the truth. I have indeed focused more on the "bystanders" in my work than on the "main players". From my point of view it is the "bystanders" in the end who make history or pass it down to others. In my writing I play that witness, that "bystander" who is trying to call attention to suppressed truths. This is in the end the overall purpose of my writing, which coincides with Okri's opinion about the purpose of poets:

They need to be multiple witnesses around central masquerades of reality in order to convey fully the unimaginable dimensions of the deities terrible and enchanting dance...the poet is the widener of consciousness (2-3).

I have taken the role of the "widener of conscious" by depicting scenes in all of my works in order to provide one truth. What is left for the poet but to work on humanity?

Matthew's quotes one Irish poet, Seamus Heaney<sup>13</sup>, defines poems as:

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<sup>12</sup> In the essay "John Hewitt: An Honest Ulsterman's 'Poemosaics'", Matthews introduces Hewitt as "in many ways the most concerted traditional of the writers who published poems in response to events in the North of Ireland from the late 1960's onward." Matthews also discusses the long-lived writing career of Hewitt and his concern for "professional standards in the handling of form. Hewitt had a "distrust of freedom and extravagance...not earned by toil within traditional modes" (45).

<sup>13</sup> Seamus Heaney is an Irish writer of international prominence. He is known for the controversy his writing has caused because he

...their society's immunity systems, going to attack whatever unhealthy or debilitating forces are at work in the body politic. And in this they manifest poetry's high potential, its function as an agent of possible transformation, of evolution towards the more radiant and generous life which imagination desires (164).

Poetry relays messages. I took up my pen to fight the disease of the war and the consequences of false news reports and a cold-hearted Europe. Poetry, although it may offer this "radiant and generous life" that Heaney discusses, also offers the terrifying and horrific life—but in either case the release of such information opens the world's eyes:

Poetry must both stand against 'reality' which continues beside it and which it must 'contain' and it must look beyond the conditions and found its own 'reality'. (164)

I think that in my works are found the desperation and helplessness along with the loneliness that war brings about. I tried to make clearer this world that surrounded Croatia for six long and devastating years. I as the author, not the speaker, played the role of "solidarity activist", "widener of consciousness", and "bystander" throughout my work. I used these three stances along with the use of soft sounds, inner rhyme and erratic punctuation, in addition to contrasting the titles with poems in order to offer my "journal of events." I found myself as a writer while writing and believe that at least with my poetry I accomplished what I had set out to do when I chose to write the following collection of poems about the War in Croatia.

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seems careful in his writing, as Matthews puts it "to not offend a British or American audience of his work by making public declarations of dissatisfaction at the wrongs suffered on the part of the minority community in the North or on the part of Ireland historically...He has equally been accuse of using that quietism t to offer slyly an explicitly nationalist agenda, one which presumably appeals to the left thinking liberals from abroad looking for a voice to echo their own righteous feelings of horror at the historical brutality of colonization" (158).

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The following is a translation of the preface to Matko Marušić's book *Are The Angels Crying*. I do not take credit that this preface should reflect my work, but that it should reveal the soul of Croatia and where I found my inspiration.

*Are the Angels Crying?*

Preface by Stjepan Lice

The war in our homeland, as much as it may seem so, is not behind us. The war in our homeland lingers on in all of us. It remains as a part of our personality. It remains incredible, confusing, even if our history so rationally explains it, even if all of us, in our own way, lived through it. Everyone received his or her share of misery. It touched those who were not directly involved or injured. It even touched those who used other's misery, our misery, to become rich. Yes, even them, although they might not think so. There are as always, those who bore other's misery and pain. They use their strength, not asking any questions, not trying to be better than anyone else; they do not spare themselves at all. Their bearing of the pain and misery saves us.

The war entered into the simplicity of our days, our relationships, and uncovered the beauty of such simplicity, how precious it is to us...the souls of those we live with, the soul of our family is more precious than anything we can earn or lose, save or spend...In the soul is the basic foundation of everything and that the war raged through our time and the space we live in is not the absolute worst that can happen to us. The most terrifying thing that war can do to us is to rage through our soul, the soul of our family. War with the soul can surprise us during the most common and calm days. In truth it is not easy to have been an angel in Croatia during the past few years-- their work was ultimately unforeseen. How does one save the living after they have been ordered to do so? How does one offer hope to the living? How does one offer hope among them at all?

Everyone has his or her own angel (maybe there are even family angels). Angels hover around us in everything that we are and in everything that happens to us. They cry because they care for us, because they breathe so closely to our souls. Nothing of ours is foreign to them. They cry and are happy when we are. They hope with us and instead of us. They cry, but quietly hiding their pain. They teach us all to become angels. Human angels. Perhaps angelic humans, both the same...

Maybe these poems are an angel...a paper angel. An angel that wants to touch us to do that which we must every day. To be noble. This way the dream we dream, the dream about our homeland, will become more real.

The homeland is the best place for the people who love her. No one who lives and dies for her will be left without her until the end of time and space. But we have not finished with defending her, Croatia. Everyone should defend her, wherever they might find themselves within her. Here she has entrusted her defense.

Translated by Diana Matijas



***POETRY COLLECTION***



## **I. Before**

## *On My Way to Slavinj*

*Mid day strolling through cornfields,  
yellow green dry heat rising up,  
blurring images  
tree groves rising in the distance  
mountain tops growing out of them  
tiring me...*

*I wake  
to sea salts  
breathing through my mouth.  
Next to me  
white sheet mystery  
moving in its own chosen way  
the sun kisses my forehead.*

*Market place  
buzzing bees,  
fresh peaches  
melting into my eyes,  
my open watering mouth  
waiting  
to nibble  
at their  
a soft skins.*

*Silver heat leads my ready feet  
to rock covered beaches  
of azure,  
emerald,  
midnight invitations.*

*Mooring docks and boat yards  
soft wood smells of  
men at work,  
baking in skeletal ovens  
of cedar and pine  
waiting to sail away.*

*White rock ditches at my right,  
white rock hospice  
leads me on the left,  
soon that evergreen smell  
of sea and conifer  
sways me toward the shore.*

*Breeze carrying children's chirpings,  
pine cone potpourri,  
lazy melodies crooning from the shade.*

*Thick sea smells  
wafting up the pine lined gravel path,  
a collage of broken glass, pine needles  
and small sharp stones  
pricking my burning  
barefoot flesh.*

*Sea gulls call me from this haze  
of green fields--  
lead me toward the beach  
splashing through  
green tree canopy,  
so cool and coming for me  
unsure,  
salt licking my lips,*

peaches waiting,  
ripe.

The heat, bright warmth  
of orange skies drying me,  
heading back  
to fish frying scents,  
lamb-baking stone piled kitchens,  
night approaching.

Sinking sun slipping  
into mountains  
or tree groves,  
coins in piggy bank dusk.

Flies bite my arms,  
still drifting through the groggy afternoon,  
voices still floating  
in and out of ripened husks.

The salt of my sweat  
waters my mouth,  
reaching for peaches that have turned into dirt.

The calm swaying of these fields  
around me,  
back and forth, here and there,  
the heat fooling me,  
I find myself  
still alone  
with the corn.

## *Into Zagreb's Evening*

*Summertime cool wraps coming dusk...*

*I run down three flights  
out of Ana's apartment,  
jumping the final step,  
running across the walk,  
down to the ground,  
stepping onto the street  
picturing the evening ahead.*

*Thick stench of exhaust  
suddenly surrounds me-  
an old Fiat flies by.*

*A little way down Zamenhoffova,  
skipping over the weeds,  
turning a sharp left  
I climb down a steep set of steps  
into chilling comfort,  
green tree flesh swallows  
the final leg of stairs.*

*On to another street,  
moving towards Rokov Park  
to 196 more steps going down.  
Dog dropping, urine puddles,  
cigarette butt, beer bottle mess of stairs,  
the stench impeding my footfalls  
reaching Dezmanova street,  
gravitating towards cappuccino, vanilla sugar walkways,  
weaving in and out of two seated tables,*

*burning in the lifting heat of summer night.*

*Trampling papers beneath my feet,  
flitting through Dezmanov Prolaz,  
movie listings of XXX flicks, no age restrictions,  
posters melted onto dingy beige  
cobblestone arch passageway.*

*Shrill buzzing streetcar whizzes by.  
Weathered drapery face standing next to me  
needs some change  
and I offer a few Kunas,  
rushing down Frankopanska.*

*Night air scented-  
cigarette smoke,  
showering soap,  
ladies perfume,  
strolling along with me,  
heading for Kavkaz, the old theatre,  
bordered with benches.*

*Finding a seat for tonight,  
to watch, to wish,  
to listen to passing arguments,  
and the buzzing of enormous night bugs,  
flying from the bushes.*

*Eight O'clock ringing of cathedral bells,  
police ordering children from graffittied monuments,  
smelling the rot of flowers  
flowing from Cvjetni Trg-  
around the corner of curling street.*

*Women in orthopedic shoes,  
closing magazine stands,  
going home.*

*Someone waving, nodding  
me into another evening  
to eat, swallow and digest.*

*Dida:1978*

*He sits on his ivy walled balcony  
feeding pigeons perched along the railing,  
cherry, pear, plum trees  
scenting the summer morning,  
breakfast coming early.  
Cool air still sneaking about  
from the night before.*

*Dida takes her hand.  
Smoke stained fingers  
tell this seven-year-old  
about the communists  
that breathe down his neck every day.*

*Coffee breath mouth  
depicts nights he lay on cold prison floors.  
Brown hazy bloodshot eyes  
detail war tanks  
that rolled into town, 1941.*

*Gray hairs poking from his undershirt  
show her black and white photos  
of uniformed men.*

*Walking hat perched atop white hairs,  
the two stroll onto his streets,  
Ilica, Jurisiceva, Gunduliceva, Meduliceva  
that used to be clean,  
snow white they used to call this city.*



Old schools and churches along the way,  
Sveti Petar, Sveti Blaz and the main Cathedral,  
museums of history dying  
Mimara and HNK.  
Morning walks along with them  
into Tuskanac park,  
through the trees,  
dentures smiling  
towards this seven year old,  
this timid little girl.

Serious look on her almond eyed face,  
so stern,  
pretending she understands  
all of his old miseries,  
playing on the wooden plank  
play ground rides.

He has so many stories,  
wedging them into  
short morning times  
to this seven year old,  
who only understands  
fourteen years later.

## *Close Call*

*I awoke to the doorbell  
ringing me out of my high strung sleep,  
I turned to Esko to tell him--  
fear in my bones  
shook me as he jumped to the window  
to see the MP's--  
looking for his brother,  
the troops await--  
a brief moment of unrest , and they leave,  
his brother is in Germany  
Esko turns to me  
whispers calmly,  
"the war has begun,"  
and we fall asleep again...*

## *The Gift*

*In the spring of 1991  
we all awaited war  
and knew weapons would be needed.  
Even the women said  
we would need something if they knocked on the door...*

*But this enemy didn't knock on doors,  
they came onto our rooftops  
and then blew away...*

*My wife's face radiated with pleasure  
and I wasn't sure why--  
Our situation was becoming desperate  
with police hours and sirens  
warning us to take care,  
but she glowed,  
"I bought you a surprise,"  
and I saw in her eyes how happy she was  
to please me  
as she offered the box  
she lifted from her purse  
wrapped in flowered tissue paper...*

*Another bottle of after shave  
or perhaps a new razor--  
but with bombs exploding  
at Zagreb's city limits  
I didn't much care for either  
and hoped she wouldn't notice  
if I pretended to be happy...*

*But the box was too heavy  
to be after shave  
and I didn't think she'd buy so many razors--  
"Slowly, don't ruin the paper,"  
but I tore at it  
with the eagerness of a child  
at Christmas time--*

*Lifting the lid  
I found something wrapped  
in an old greasy kitchen cloth  
now taking my time  
I carefully lifted one fold  
after the other  
to see  
the gift my wife bought for me  
was a pistol,  
small with a broken handle,  
not wrapped in the cloth it should be,  
but it was beautiful and terrifying  
when I realized that now my wife  
thought we needed a gun in the house.*

## *Postman*

*We awoke this morning,  
early morning blistering through the kitchen windows,  
mother and daughter with me  
pouring coffee,  
my in-laws to be...*

*The postman knocks  
carrying papers--official papers,  
the two look at me  
to wake him  
and the heat gets hotter.*

*I slip through the kitchen door,  
clicking of machine guns, army boots scraping over unmarked graves  
invade my mind, as I creak open the door to our room.*

*He sleeps, short breaths, quick breaths,  
not flinching to the squeak of that old door,  
I'd entered and re-entered early mornings,  
but never to wake him.*

*The papers in my hand-- official papers,  
August 28th,  
like someone had given me the date of my death.*

*This day we had talked about,  
in far away thoughts,  
this day we thought would never come,  
sweat stinging my sunburned skin,  
scorching down my back--*

*And I wake him-slowly-quietly,  
taking my time thinking that I can  
make it disappear if he just keeps sleeping.  
In the hazy wave of waking up  
he signs the papers,  
still in a dream I suspect,  
signing the little line  
that means his life--*

*I turn quickly back to the kitchen,  
my nightgown hooks on the handle of the old door  
and I turn to see him sleeping again.*

*Closing the door,  
not knowing if he knows what he signed  
Wondering how I might lose  
these papers on the way back to the kitchen.*

## **II. During**

## *My Sixth Son*

*How do I turn my eyes down when the soldiers come  
to tell me I must give up my sixth son  
to take him to war...*

*This child I birthed has never held a gun,  
in his eyes I have not seen the hate that can kill,  
I cannot give him away.*

*In this boy I saw two- as I lost the one before him...  
the little one that came to me-- this child I allowed  
in my marriage bed-- even when his father disapproved--*

*Early mornings I had risen to work the piazza--  
unwound his little fingers from the twirling of my hair,  
I admit I loved him more than the others.*

*My youngest son--a man to the generals- still lays his head  
on my lap-- has never seen a dead man--  
and they send him to the graveyards.*

*My other children gone--I never thought he'd leave--  
my musing child has gone to war-- and the words are never real--  
does not matter how many times I hear them.*

*This child with nothing more than an empty pistol  
at his side, now sleeps in the fields, twirling long  
grass in his fingers, lulled by homeward dreams...*

*This child soon sees death-- when the bullets race around him,  
the youth vacuumed out of him, he suffers every day, a piece  
of this death game he will never escape.*



*One morning he comes back to me, after nights he slept  
on blood covered tarps, he comes home,  
my sixth son comes, but the eyes are not his.*

*"Mama" he cries, "where are my friends, can they forgive me,  
that I live and they are gone?"*

*I see death in my sixth son's eyes--and in the night  
I hear the cries, alone in his room-- no longer twirling anything,  
my child was lost in the fields.*

## *My Brother's Hands*

*Yesterday I returned to the field  
fourteen kilometers outside of Vukovar-  
I spent ninety-three days straight in this field,  
Forty-six of us-and we thought we could hold her city limits.*

*I almost have to laugh when I recall  
the guns we used, the pistols and the knives,  
all collected within two days of the first attack,  
the first time the Chetniks decided they would have her.*

*We patrolled the southern borders of Vukovar,  
the wooded area where my brother and I used to hunt pheasant,  
I carried the same rifle then  
and I never let my brother touch it.*

*I thought he was too gentle,  
cared too much about our little sister,  
about changing her, feeding her, reading bedtime stories,  
he didn't know how to hold a rifle...*

*Then the Chetniks came,  
started firing , shot two men three meters away from us,  
and I gave my brother my rifle.  
His elegant, delicate fingers  
wound around the barrel.*

*The creeping ivy coiled around our outer gates  
didn't have the grip my brother had  
and it made me laugh  
when I thought of those same hands  
changing my sister's soiled pants.*

*For twenty-seven days we stood together,  
and he held my rifle  
like a mother holds a child;  
he was prepared to fire.*

*The blasting above our heads  
and the grenades going off around us  
like some nightmare rainstorm bent to kill  
the bullets hailing into our helmets.*

*He didn't look at me  
when he fell on his knees  
and his hands began to tremble  
and his eyes began to roll.*

*My elegant delicate brother  
lies face down,  
I don't remember seeing any blood  
don't even know where he was hit...*

*I stayed at my point, guarding Vukovar  
for sixty-nine more days,  
buried my brother behind me  
in a spot under the trees.*

*I crossed his long fingers  
wove all ten into a mound  
upon his chest  
and put him into the ground.*

*Those cold nights in the fields--  
I dreamt my brother's hands  
digging their way out  
of his amateur grave.*

*Today I come back to Vukovar  
and visit the patch of trees where my brother lies  
his hands most certainly as I had left them  
my brother's elegant, delicate hands folded forever.*

## *Stayed Behind*

*" I hold no grudge against anyone  
for being abandoned" from Abandoned by Zbigniew Herbert*

*It is so quiet tonight  
the city has died...*

*I didn't want to go--  
all the neighbors,  
all of my friends  
wrapped their lives into sheets  
or threw them into trash bags  
and joined the defeated march  
out of Vukovar---*

*The streets are completely deserted  
but the Serbs will come,  
move into our homes  
sit on our sofas,  
sleep in our beds  
and watch Belgrade News on our TVs.*

*They will eat our Kulen and prosciutto  
and drink the tea left in our pantries.*

*Tonight I can walk through the streets  
they don't know I'm here,  
stroll through the hotels,  
have a drink here or there  
on the house,  
I'll have to find a hotel with all four walls  
even a bar,*

*I can't be sure if their guards are here  
and don't want to risk  
them seeing my lit cigarette.  
Buildings still smoking  
and walls still crumbling,  
so I doubt  
they can hear my footfalls.*

*The dead are swallowed by the dark,  
laying on the streets,  
I trip over a dozen or so-  
on my way to Roko cafe  
my usual place --  
maybe I'll find a Tuborg or even Heineken  
Sljivovica would suit me fine,  
as I sit in my city  
deserted-*

*Behind the bar I see the silhouette  
of a dead bar tender,  
slumped over the cooler  
he had nowhere to hide,  
two Croat soldiers  
laying next to their last beers  
and the waitress,  
maybe they thought they were safe...*

*I'll have to wait,  
then I'll have to escape,  
for now I'll just sip my Sljivovica  
in the dark of Vukovar--*

*I really never thought  
I would have to leave,  
probably tonight I'll go.*

*I don't think anyone else stayed,  
I don't know which way they went,  
I don't think I will get out alive--  
Serb tanks have surrounded the city,  
if I want to go,  
I will have to crawl  
and play dead along the way...  
Still- I'll just sip my sljivovica  
and maybe create a plan,  
how to run away from home  
and leave everything to them--  
in the morning Serbs will be drinking my coffee  
without sugar--I just ran out  
before the invasion.*

*Tonight the world is different,  
it was normal a few days ago,  
now every corner of this city  
is barren and helpless  
and cluttered with rubble  
of what was a civilized place...*

*I wonder what world news agencies are saying  
and who is watching-  
and if my body will ever be found  
and identified...*

*But at least I stayed behind  
for one last farewell  
to my Vukovar  
along with one last sip of the spirit  
to keep me warm  
and ready for my escape.*



## *Hide and Seek*

*Shaking from fear  
crouching in the corner of my closet  
I cover my daughter's mouth  
so the soldiers won't hear  
that we're inside.*

*They knocked my favorite lamp  
to the floor,  
I know,  
I can see  
a piece of it through the crack in the closet door--*

*I see their guns and rifles,  
but only parts,  
moving  
from one side to the other.*

*Yesterday a pack of Serbs  
moved through the neighboring village  
and we've been sitting in the closet  
since last night --*

*My husband and all the other men  
are on other terrains  
and they don't know we're under attack  
I wonder if they ever will...*

*My hand is wet from my daughter's tears,  
she's trying so hard to be quiet.*

*It's only a matter of minutes  
before they open the door  
and see us sitting here--*

*They're not just looking for people,  
drawers being emptied,  
trinkets falling all over,  
and the bed being slashed--  
their knives ripping through the mattress,  
feathers flying everywhere--*

*A gun goes off,  
one of them shot the television,  
it must have made him angry,  
another yells at him  
"Idiot, we could have taken that with us!"*

*They are in my house,  
there aren't even that many,  
but they are armed  
taking whatever they want--  
I am helpless  
with my daughter  
in my closet...*

*In the dining room  
they knock over the China cabinet,  
all of the cobalt and crystal shatter--*

*They are furious,  
they haven't found anyone to kill,  
yet.*

*All the windows are breaking,  
they need to use their rifles for something--*

*Maybe only two minutes have passed,  
though it seems like forever  
God must be here,  
in this room--  
How could they have missed the closet?*

*A Serb shouts from outside  
something about the barn  
and the neighboring house--*

*This is worse than any movie I've ever seen  
and now I'm perversely calm.*

*Screaming, somebody is screaming,  
they found the neighbors,  
the Serb soldiers happy now  
they've found someone to kill--*

*Machine gun's rip bellows  
over the soldier's laughter  
though I hear the neighbors begging  
the massacre begins...*

*Neighbors didn't have time  
to find a better hiding place--*

*It could have been us,  
maybe it should have been  
or was going to be--*

*A pack of enemy soldiers  
passing through our village,  
they don't want to occupy  
just empty it,  
eleven houses, seven fields and a church.*

*My daughter and I  
still hiding  
we'll wait until dark to come out  
or maybe tomorrow.*

## *How To Be Brave*

*We were ready for the attacks  
and prepared everything by the plan  
the police passed out as the war began--*

*When the siren rang  
I took my son,  
my wife turned off the lights  
and closed the doors,  
opened the windows  
according to the directions  
we heard on the news  
and we ran into the cellar--*

*The other tenants came down too  
and we waited in the dark  
for the radio to tell us to go back upstairs...*

*This time we did not wait too long  
and back in our kitchen  
my son ensured me he wasn't scared,  
but such a serious statement of bravery  
from such a small boy  
only made the moment more terrifying.*

*I knew he was scared  
and what could I do?  
He was shaking from fear  
and as I held him  
I felt his heart beating faster than mine  
and his serious statement  
only made me sad--*

*This was only the beginning,  
we had just prepared the shelter  
the whole country was prepared to fight,  
no one even mentioned peace.*

*We had just laid down  
when we all heard the explosion  
before any siren rang warning  
we rushed back to the cellar  
as another went off-*

*My wife covered her face  
praying the "Our Father"--  
I was afraid,  
but couldn't cry or pray,  
only hate these people  
for scaring my wife and son,  
cuss their mothers and fathers away...*

*We slept in the cellar that night,  
peace was far away...*

*The next morning  
I told my son  
I had realized  
that he was the oldest boy  
in the building,  
he had to be civil commander of the shelter  
and I told him all he needed to know...*

*Two days went by without the sound  
of gunfire and explosions--  
and then that night we heard the shrill bells*

*my son took command--  
telling us where to go.*

*The tenants all listened to him  
as he lined them up in the cellar,  
calling roll  
to make sure everyone was down,  
and everyone was safe,  
all the lights were off,  
all the windows left open,  
that everyone had water and food,  
as we all waited for the signal to go back upstairs...*

*I watched my boy  
watching everyone  
looking so soldier like for his six years  
not shaking or crying  
giving us all strength  
because he had a duty  
to make us all safe.*

*My six year old son  
encouraged everyone to smile  
and even laugh...  
my son showed us how to be brave  
and wait for the bombs to stop exploding  
so we could go back upstairs.*

## *Happy*

*"The smell of death as blood and glass  
is hosed from the streets and the beggar holds  
his diminishing hand to your face."--Carolyn Forché from "Expatriate"*

*This morning fourteen cluster bombs rang through the streets  
in my neighborhood--  
and we are still inside waiting for the experts  
to come and make the streets safe  
until they attack again.*

*I don't want to look outside or listen to the people  
running through the streets--  
I'm happy that I live alone because  
there's no one to worry about  
although I wish someone would worry about me.*

*The people outside, crying and moaning,  
don't have the strength to scream any more  
or fight or defend themselves--  
I am happy I live alone because  
I don't have to search the streets for a dead loved one--*

*I don't have to go outside and step over the puddles  
of blood, or move around dismembered extremities,  
don't have to lay my hands over their eyes  
to close them one last time.*

*I don't have to listen to short breaths  
of a dying child  
and I don't have to tie my scarf around  
anyone's wounds.*



*I don't have to wait for hours after the attacks  
until everyone comes home,  
I don't have to worry any more  
about my children or my husband.*

*I don't have to cook any more meals  
or wash any more clothes  
or wonder where they are  
and why they're not home.*

*I used to walk through those streets,  
stepping over pipes and doors,  
all blasted from the houses in this neighborhood,  
stepping over car parts and suitcases  
until I saw their faces, my children and their father.*

*All three lying side by side,  
the bomb must have detonated as they passed by,  
the older girl was still breathing  
while her father and sister were not.*

*I closed their eyes one last time  
and tied my scarf around my daughter's wounds  
but it was of no use.*

*Then the rain begins*

*It's six O'clock in the morning,  
I'm drinking this coffee alone,  
one more time  
waiting for the front door to open  
because your friends came here  
last night  
to tell me  
they heard you were coming home--*

*The Maslenica action is accomplished  
and you're supposed to come home this time--  
I wonder if those are your boots  
I hear clicking in the calla...*

*I wonder at every sound.  
Every day a new creak,  
the bathroom door or the kitchen floor  
or in the baby's room.*

*I secretly play house with myself  
and our daughter  
and we pretend that you are here.*

*I've hidden your pistol and the hunting knife,  
packed away your all-weather boots,  
folded the extra uniform.  
I've even put away your badges of honor  
because I pretend you are not at war  
in our game of house.*

*The sounds surround us,  
of this city half alive  
breathing helplessly under the strain  
of Chetnik soldiers holding her down--  
and you are somewhere defending her...*

*We hear the muffled explosions  
in the mountains far off.  
In Zadar we feel the grenades  
go off  
but sometimes it's just thunder.*

*I hear the gates slightly rattle  
and the shrubbery stirs  
perhaps someone passing  
or you coming home--*

*One look out the window  
and I see the drops fall  
fat on the ground.  
Just drops, no one's footfall,  
no one's hand rattling the gate  
or bag stirring the shrubs,  
it's just the rain beginning  
to fool me again.*

## *A Third Plate*

*I watched you yesterday when you wrung out  
the laundry.*

*Your son's shirts still being washed every other day  
even though he'll not wear them again.*

*We sit together at dinner and I do not want  
to stop you from setting that third place--*

*We haven't got much money, but I let you buy  
that third chicken breast--*

*Because, I expect to see him again, too.*

*Every morning I look at that cobblestone  
alleyway and remember how he did not turn  
around one last time --*

*I told him not to because I was sure he'd return.*

*I only watched his machine click against the alley wall  
and his green cap slide slowly to the left.*

*He dragged his feet like he always did.  
When he disappeared around the corner,  
I briefly wished he would have turned around.*

*I let you leave his dinner on the counter.  
I let you leave a midnight snack.  
I let you talk about our wedding.  
I let you talk about him coming back.*

*I don't want to believe it's true,  
not for you or me.*

*The third plate will never be empty.*

## *In The Fields*

*"We had to get out, and the soldiers lined us up. We got scared and tore the blindfolds down. We were in a big field covered with dead bodies. Instantly, the soldiers opened machine gun fire at us.*

*Smail Hadzic*

*Srebrenica July 1995*

*I hear the guns this morning firing through the forests surrounding the city.  
Srebrenica. I try to hide my family and myself.*

*But they come.*

*The Serb soldiers take two thousand of us.  
We are all unarmed farmers.  
Gaunt faced young Serb, young enough to be my son,  
prods my legs with his bayonet-- "Mici se, stari, mici se"*

*We walk the road towards the basketball gym a few miles away.  
Blindfolded.  
We stumble slowly--  
remembering the mines that might be buried in front of us.*

*I am so thirsty.  
And they give us water,  
tainted water,  
I cannot speak above a whisper any more.  
We are still moving-until we enter what I think is a van.*

*I am not afraid, not yet.*

*The vehicle halts and we're pushed off.  
Marching silently.  
I know this is a death march.  
We trip over what I think is wood.*

*I become afraid now  
and tear the blindfold off  
to see the field around me  
blanketed with arms, legs and deteriorating heads.*

*I fall to the ground when the machine guns go off.  
My fellow farmers fall dead on top of me.  
I do not try to breathe.*

*They leave us here.  
Their secret.  
I hear them finish off a breathing few.  
They miss me...*

*I lay there for hours.  
When I was sure I heard not a sound,  
I crawled out from under my dead mates  
and hid in the forest for five days.*

*I came to a safe place and quickly bathed,  
but I will never wash the stench of death away.*

## *Summer Camp*

*Twenty-four years old  
and going off to camp,  
like one he'd never dreamt of,  
leaving early morning, through lush forests  
quilting the soft mountain slopes--  
he marches off to camp--*

*Twenty-four years old  
and no knap-sack on his back.  
No campfire songs,  
no roasting marshmallows at the campfire site.  
Tonight he stays at his first dwelling  
encircled by barbed wire fences...*

*Tall withered rooftops,  
sardine soldiers and civilians packed inside,  
haggard men lie listlessly  
listening to the quiet moans  
of fellow campers in raked flesh  
and pitted eyes-- swallow slowly warm blood  
trickling from bashed teeth...*

*Twenty-four years old  
and sleeping at his summer camp  
where living skeletons sweep across  
the grassy grounds-- rolling cigarettes  
from newspapers with blacked out lines  
that tell the story of the summer escape  
only the chosen get to attend.*



*Into the night the swift shouts  
and short shot of camp counselors tend  
to the new ones...  
Twenty-four years old sleeping on the floor  
at summer camp...*

*Morning coming early-- no bugle awakes them,  
the butts of machine guns are better alarms  
to go join their groups and play the new games  
of dodging racing bullets  
and evading lethal knives  
at summer camp on the Serbian side.*

## *Tilt*

*He comes here every day  
and brings ten of his closest friends  
and they turn the lights off.*

*I don't know how they found out  
but it was my birthday three days ago  
and the boys wanted to celebrate.*

*They were all drunk  
with whiskey on their lips  
and cigarettes hanging from them--*

*Each of them touches me  
they take turns  
playing their pinball game.*

*They all do it the same way,  
take hold of my shoulders  
and thrust and thrust...*

*I don't feel anything any more,  
not their vicious hands,  
not their toothless mouths.*

*Fingers on my breasts,  
grasping at their flippers,  
they count my cries.*

*The boys keep score,  
each one plays harder than the other  
and I never know who wins.*

*I'm locked away in the game room  
and the boys come,  
they come every afternoon.*

*Sometimes my head hits the wall  
or I'm lifted on one foot  
but somehow I never break.*

*My eyes blink on and off  
and the light in them goes dull  
but the game doesn't end 'til they turn off.*

*They usually slap my sides  
trying to hit the big bell  
but I can't give a score.*

*The player's rough uniforms  
chafe my polished finish  
and the gun holsters bruise my frame.*

*They can never win  
not when they play so rough  
and tilt into game over.*

## *Wild Horse*

*Running on the slopes surrounding Sarajevo  
free beneath the sun  
playing with her young  
nothing could tame her--  
in her anger she'd flash white teeth  
storming against the black in her eyes  
and no one could harness the fire inside her  
when she'd run through the olive tree groves  
during summers spent by the sea.  
She'd gracefully whip her mane  
while emerging out of Adriatic blue  
never imagining what kind of cage  
she'd be forced into...*

*Wisps of black hair and cleopatra eyes  
move swiftly through the night  
carrying an infant beneath the thick black shroud  
moving quickly through alleyways  
trying to reach shelter before dawn--  
before they become living targets--*

*Snow fall freezing air in the damp cellar  
where they hide crouching behind old wine barrels  
she feeds her infant with what is left in her meager breast  
crying silently away the death of her husband,  
this morning he was killed by a sniper  
while shaving in their bathroom,  
she knew their building was under siege  
so she waited for night  
to risk the streets  
and try to get to the Croatian side.*

*Her child whimpering beneath her  
driving her madder by the minute  
she can't do a thing to help it  
anger burning her eyes and nostrils,  
she'd never been trapped before.*

*Falling onto her knees,  
collapsing onto her side,  
she pulls the baby to her  
and drapes an old potato sack over the both of them  
whipping her long black hair  
behind her shoulder,  
remembering summers running on beaches  
when no one could catch her--  
they always told her she had a noble air  
while running,  
her long legs striding down the stretch  
now cramped beneath the burlap  
hiding them from the soldiers  
that cage her in her own city--*

*Breathing as quietly as she can,  
she hears a man coming down the steps  
to the cellar they hide in,  
he's knocking things over  
shoving his machine gun barrel into dark corners of the place,  
finally hooking onto the burlap  
the barrel uncovers them both--*

*Soldier grabs her and the baby,  
calls someone down,  
and they drag them outside,  
she's bucking furiously*

in the cold of the night,  
they strip her down  
and whip her into submission,  
her body no longer strong enough  
to reject them  
while in her eyes burning hate  
for the bearded rapist  
dressed in soldier uniform--  
lashing at her face,  
mounting her obscenely  
and all the others watch him  
drive her spirit out of her  
somewhere she hears her baby crying,  
but she can't reach it now,  
he pounds his fist into her face  
waiting for her to react,  
but her body has surrendered  
and the others are angry  
because they won't  
have a chance to ride  
her wild spirit out of her.  
They leave her limp body in the street  
for others to see  
how they'll tame the citizens  
and teach them to run.

## *Picnic*

*The bread used to smell sweet  
in the heat of the brick stove burning  
until the Chetniks  
cremated their victims in it,  
and the lamb baking warm, soft  
turned to soldier's skin stench  
choking rosemary air,  
homemade wine poured thick red,  
glided long and warm  
down our throats  
until the long sleek silver knives  
they carried spilled our heavy blood  
deep into the ground.*

*Our Saturday afternoons  
beneath the cypress trees,  
soft sea salt stinging our lips  
and children-- always children everywhere--  
and then the bearded devil  
came to town  
carrying bayonets and sheaths  
in his bag of tricks...*

*Our village, grandmothers and babies,  
little boys and mothers  
always gathered around  
the sweet lamb scenting the neighborhood--  
we all waited for a soft slice  
from the man rolling the spit--  
celebrating the afternoon,  
the sun, the mountains*

*and sometimes just the breeze  
in our village by the sea.*

*But the children disappeared  
and the grandmothers laid face down  
drowned in their own blood--  
the man rolling the spit  
killed our fathers and brothers,  
mothers and aunts,  
raped our sisters and girlfriends,  
wives and nuns  
so we no longer notice  
the sun, breeze or sea  
and no longer sit beneath the cypress trees.*



## *Harvest*

*In these dire days  
where flesh meets fire,  
woman reaps the wheat.*

*Boys on hedges  
cock and whistle and cuss  
at and around  
the horse eyed children.*

*The boughs break  
with the rat-a-tat-tat  
of long annoying rain drops  
that liquor up the nights  
until the ocean comes barreling through...*

*Mid-summer rain days  
slip over mud-island tree houses  
into duck pond resort camps  
when the night is silent  
over the boon of cricket cars.*

*Looming off the shoreways  
into coming night of tomorrow  
the dream peeks through  
her eyes--away onto the swift  
blue step of the shepherd boy  
somewhere among the Chetniks  
that ate the cores of old women  
in pig-pit and cow dung now buried.*

*Bayonet morticians--  
funeral cropping  
fields hosting death at mountains feet  
until some tiny justice weeds through*

## *Waiting For Spring*

*I wanted to buy new underwear  
but I will wait until the spring,  
I don't want to waste money  
because I might not be alive,  
being 81 years old, in this house alone--  
no one ever sees my underwear.*

*I often dream that I'm walking,  
telling myself that indeed I can do it  
keeping a fast pace through Zagreb,  
visiting the old cafes I used to know  
until I wake up to see where I am,  
alone in this house where I've lived for fifty years.*

*I used to cook for four when my boys were still home  
smell of fried potatoes takes me back  
when they would come and tell me  
what happened at school that day  
and years later when they told me  
they were leaving for America.*

*I watch from my balcony, uniformed boys going by,  
I see on TV the war they're going to join,  
My poor Croatia, a fish out of water fighting with air,  
I read about it in the paper  
my niece brings me once a week...*

*My husband was from Zadar  
and the city is now in ruins,  
he was always afraid Dalmatia would pay  
for the Adriatic she lays on.*

*I can't go down the stairs  
asthma and a heart condition  
keep me from the land the boys are fighting to defend  
and I wonder if my husband's restless ghost  
is somewhere on the battlefield...*

*I don't have time to think about that any more,  
can't hear the fighting anyway  
and I haven't seen any wounded soldiers,  
the pictures on TV and in the paper  
may as well be taken out of the movies  
I have no one to cry for any more  
I just live every day as if it's my last  
maybe even see one more spring  
but I won't waste my last days  
thinking about a country I might never see--  
the war has only just begun and I don't recall any short wars.*

### **III. After**

## *He's Coming Home*

*My brother is an engineer  
but when the bombs began to fly in Bosnia  
the Serbs made him a street cleaner  
and later he disappeared.*

*It's been three years since he vanished  
and I still hear him fiddling around in the kitchen  
in the morning when I'm half asleep.  
I hate that feeling that comes  
when the reality sets in  
and the day begins  
without him one more time.*

*Tomorrow I'll hear from him, I know it  
when my intuition tells me so,  
but she's been telling me for quite some time  
and I can't trust her any more--*

*Sometime I hear the gates jingle  
in the middle of the night  
and I wait to hear him  
roll his motorcycle slowly in--  
he used to love riding at night--  
before the war-  
before the snipers-  
but the wind just keeps shaking the chains...*

*I hear the news reports every morning, afternoon and night--  
the mass graves of unnamed faces,  
but I don't think he's there,  
not my brother the engineer.*

## *Tomatoes and Bread*

*I do not remember where the market place was  
or the reason I'm trying to find it during  
this summer morning in the season of fresh life.*

*I do not remember the morning I sent Jasmina  
to buy bread and tomatoes and how she didn't return  
to me.*

*I remember the days before that morning and I cannot  
escape the days after-- but the morning I sent Jasmina  
has dissolved and vanished--*

*We knew the drills--the white tanks walking us back  
and forth across the streets--dancing death dances  
with sniper sent bullets.*

*I now smell the scents of bent summer dusk coming  
to wrap me while I walk through where I think  
the market place was...*

*I remember important men and important papers  
and the words "peace" and "cease-fire" becoming cliché,  
but on that day I sent her for bread and tomatoes.*

*My sister reminds me of the way I found her lying  
on her side-- my Jasmina and a bag of tomatoes,  
some change in her hand for bread.*

*Small hole in her shoulder led a path to the base  
of her head and on her face no words were pressed  
and I wondered had she thought of her mama the moment she died.*

*I walk through the square where I think it was  
two years ago this past winter-- I wonder does she watch me  
when I cross the bricks where I found her laying.  
I wonder if they see me-- the souls of the dead  
that left too soon... I wonder if the sad wind that howls  
through the alleys carries the echoing  
of all the children that died.*

*I do not remember, only know it too well, as I walk  
through the square where the market place was  
two years ago this winter.*

*I visit Jasmina once every Sunday and carry a bag  
of tomatoes and bread to leave  
on her headstone until I return.*



## *My Father*

*Today I heard the sirens ringing  
but it was only a test...*

*In my father's house there are three rooms  
and I feel him everywhere  
when I look at the peeling paint  
in his old room  
and the piles of books  
he used to read  
while studying to be an engineer...*

*I know he used to sit at this table  
I sit at now  
and look out the window  
to see the trees  
that greeted him every morning.*

*When the afternoon is completely still  
I can hear the sea breathing  
calmly during the afternoon Bonaca...*

*When the sun sets  
I like to watch it sink  
into the piggy bank mountain slopes  
and the whole world is a soft purple  
with lavender and rosemary coming with the breeze...*

*My father's brother sent him Old Spice  
from America  
before his afternoon walk he always shaved  
and the whole house would smell of it,*

sometimes until he returned,  
if I concentrate hard enough  
I can even smell it now...  
It is all so calm now  
until I fall asleep  
and see my father walking towards the piazza,  
where he loved to stroll his afternoons away,  
discussing politics and fishing  
with all the other fathers in town,  
and in my dream I shout  
for him to come back  
but he keeps walking away...

And I think back to when  
lavender afternoons quickly became soot filled days,  
when I couldn't hear the sea  
from our position in the cellar,  
where we lived in the dark  
listening to bombs exploding all over Dubrovnik.

I couldn't smell the rosemary then,  
only fire burning whatever was in its way,  
and our war began  
all the fathers went to fight  
they all promised to come back...

Before we had to hide,  
I took my father's Old Spice  
and one of his handkerchiefs  
into the cellar with me...

*Every day waking up in the cellar  
I poured a few drops onto the cloth,  
to have my father with me.*

*We only had a radio  
and two oil burning lamps  
in the cellar,  
my mother held her rosary  
and my little sister was afraid,  
but I held the handkerchief  
and ignored the radio  
only waiting for my father to come home.  
At night my mother let me sneak upstairs  
to take the bread and cheese  
some soldier would leave for us  
by orders of my father--  
I knew he was somewhere defending our city,  
so he could have his piazza and his friends  
and the freedom  
he used to tell me about,  
the way his father told him.*

*And one day the siren rang  
and kept ringing,  
we heard trucks, soldiers  
gun shots,  
grenades,  
and half of Dubrovnik was on fire--*

*Until a sudden silence  
overcame the streets  
the soft crackling of burning houses  
was all I could hear*

*waiting for the soldier's boots  
to click their way up to our door  
and leave the packet left every day...*

*The nights turned into day  
and there was no bread and cheese,  
for the next five days  
we sat in the cellar  
with nothing to eat...*

*My mother only gripped her rosary  
and my sister kept crying she's hungry,  
I clutched the cloth with the Old Spice,  
wondering why my father didn't send any soldiers.*

*But they came  
with bread and cheese and milk and fruit  
and the news  
that my father was a very brave man  
and he managed to stay on the front lines  
the day the sirens didn't stop ringing...*

*It's been five years since that day,  
I still live in my father's house  
and do things the way he used to do,  
take his walks every afternoon,  
talk to all the other fathers  
who always tell me  
I would have been proud to see my father  
fighting for Dubrovnik  
the day the sirens didn't stop ringing.*

## *Side Effects*

*The first trams barreling down the street  
every morning  
make me jump from my pillow  
expecting to see  
tanks coming through my front door-*

*Exhaust pipes fire at the stoplights  
and I can't help but duck  
into open landing doors-*

*Every day a bomb goes off  
to mark noontime in Zagreb,  
a long time tradition,  
gives me panic attacks-*

*The children's cries in their household games  
draw the scenes back to me...*

*Four babies line up next to one another  
with the Chetnik flag waving proudly  
above their latest victory-*

*More dead children...*

*I never thought I would see so many-  
on the streets- bodies in an afternoon nap,  
a strong sleep they just won't wake from-*

*Even the spring flowers don't matter any more,  
I lay in them too long  
defending Zadar atop the peaks of Mount Velebit-*

*And the summer storms...the thunder and the lightning  
suffocate me,  
ever present nervous sweat in the palms of my hand  
and the small of my back-*

*I told my wife not to grill meat any more,  
burning flesh always smells the same to me-*

*The fighting never ends in my head  
the dreams and memories keep returning-*

*Sometimes I smell the rotting flesh  
of my fellow soldiers  
next to whom I lay for days  
hoping the Chetnik guards,  
watching over their kill,  
wouldn't notice I was alive-*

*And now the side effects  
from this disease called war  
infect most of my days-*

*My medals don't shine  
and my honors aren't written  
but they are with me where ever I am  
in the sounds and smells of life after war.*

*I don't care about the weather*

*When I ask you to tell me  
about the night you spent  
in the trenches on the east  
wall of Vukovar  
you talk about the weather.*

*I don't care if it's raining  
or snowing or warm...  
I want to know about the war  
when you killed the men across the street  
and then cried  
because they used to be your friends.*

*I feel your rage only when you sleep  
you keep your hands in a strange battle position  
or sometimes clutch my hair  
and the howling in your breath  
makes me insane  
when I want to know your nightmares  
when you scream whose dying eyes do you see?*

*Do you dream about the headless children,  
the sodomized soldiers or the young women raped  
by your old friends?*

*I often wonder how you can even live  
with all that death inside of you,  
when you hold our son  
do you hear the whistling of bullets  
in his sleeping breath?*

*I watch you flinch when a summer storm hits,  
I suspect you can't stand  
the lightning and the thunder,  
I remember when it used to be romantic.*

*When I go to cut the roast pig  
we fired in celebration of your return  
I notice your disgust at the smell of roasting meat-  
my love what happened in those fields  
who did they make you eat?*

*My eyes plead with you,  
you look at the sky  
to tell me what a beautiful day it is,  
then you look away again  
into your own world where the sun might shine forever  
but you will never notice or care about the weather.*



## *Infidelity*

*You live in a whiskey dream, husband,  
in the night when just you and the sea can talk  
about the way it used to be before  
you took a knife and a gun  
and went to save the villages around us  
from the heavy Serb hands  
that beat down mercilessly on everyone--  
the babies that cried  
and the children that died watching you fight  
to keep them alive,  
even when the whole village was on fire  
and you had nowhere to go  
except back to the sea  
that speaks to you  
in long drawn whispers  
seeping through pebbles on the beach...*

*"I hear you crying  
soft and slow...  
come to me...  
into my quiet deep blue..."*

*Your lover is the Adriatic  
and you share your war stories with her  
afraid that I won't understand  
how you live in a world  
buried beneath recent memories  
of gun fire and grenades,  
tanks and bayonets  
that kept your side  
in the Dinaric mountains*

while you watched your sea  
crying and calling you  
seducing with rosemary and lavender perfume  
"Come home  
and sleep next to me  
on my shore  
I'll take you in..."

All the days and nights  
you watched her,  
listened to her,  
she soothed you when the bombs exploded  
and trucks rambled past,  
when covered in other soldier's blood  
she promised to wash you...

You heard her shoom  
on the wind blowing up to you,  
carrying salty promises  
into your eyes.

You want to be inside of her  
on her waves  
away from the world.

I see the way you look at her  
when we go to the beach,  
you fell in love with her  
while far off on the mountain tops,  
and now I watch you love her.

Do I see anger on your face  
when I dive in...

*Her wide bosom kept you sane  
while I hid underground  
and she laughed at me  
with her afternoon tides,  
rolling boldly in ,  
not afraid of the air raids and fires,  
raging on the shore,  
showing her strength  
telling you to come to her...*

*"I will hide you  
comfort and surround you  
in my azure cove  
you won't be alone"*

*You make love to her  
in front of me,  
she takes you silently,  
eloquently.*

*I don't have the strength to fight  
your lover,  
her arms waving my entire body away.*

*She holds you,  
rocks you  
so you can forget  
your orders to shoot and kill,  
the screams of dying enemy soldiers  
and the hate in their eyes  
as they breathed their last breath...*

*I cannot comfort you  
and won't take you from your mistress  
in your whiskey dreams.*

## *War Movies*

*Landing in Dusseldorf,  
after five long years in America,  
coming through the gate,  
I first see your eyes beating out of their sockets  
brown and excited and sad and curious,  
wondering if I am happy to see you...*

*You look like a lost child  
and you take me in your arms,  
wondering if I am real,  
and I feel the waves in your heart  
crash into mine,  
I take your hands and see the scars  
up and down your arms—  
you wrote to me about them...*

*Taking a closer look at your face  
I see the traces of shrapnel scratches  
on your right cheek...  
and the age,  
you look too old for your twenty six years—*

*Suddenly-like a flashback scene  
in some cliché film  
I imagine you in war  
and wonder how you could be happy to see me*

*You had connections,  
when the Chetniks attacked Croatia,  
so you sent me to America  
when they called you to join the war*

and I did not want to go  
where short wave radios and CNN  
would become my only friends.  
I forgot that you were real,  
out of habit I searched the faces  
of the soldiers that CNN was reporting on  
and the pictures all blended—  
the prison camps, the children  
wandering parentless  
cameras catching them all  
the mothers and sons  
and me  
in America  
watching...

My nights were your mornings  
and your mornings were my nights  
we couldn't even share time...

Report after report  
of cities being sieged—

We spent our honeymoon in Dubrovnik—  
I watched her burn on CBS World News...

My family lives in Zadar,  
I heard bombs going off there,  
background sounds for the BBC news minutes  
where they told listeners that the Chetniks surround her  
and no one can go there for holiday any more...

I was supposed to come to Split  
to meet you,

*but cluster bombs rang through the streets of Zagreb,  
and CNN warned all Americans in Croatia to leave,  
I called Swiss Air to change my flight schedule  
to meet you in Dusseldorf.*

*Here we are at the airport  
looking at each other as if we just met  
and I keep thinking about war movies  
and why they make them  
with happy endings  
when war doesn't have any.*

## *Afternoon*

*From my window I can see  
the whole center of the city,  
all of the goings on...*

*Diocletian's palace looms anciently  
around the youth of Split--  
many of them hiding in passageways  
and beneath old, heavy stone stairs,  
so the rest of us won't see their eyes  
blood shot and dilating,  
heads bobbing,  
leaning against walls or friends  
they don't see me watching  
as they pull down their sleeves  
so no one can see the tiny punctures  
on the inside of their arms--*

*Displaced persons wander shoeless  
through the streets  
and stand in front of Sveti Dujó,  
hoping church goers will give  
a Kuna or two--  
their homes in Sarajevo and Bihac  
are occupied  
or destroyed,  
so they drifted west to the sea.*

*Gypsy children laugh,  
sneaking peaches from fruit stands  
before taking their daily tour,  
cafe after cafe,*



table after table,  
asking for spare change  
for a sandwich or cigarettes--  
Young veterans on benches  
lined along Split's Riva  
trying to pretend  
nothing has changed for them  
as they smile at young ladies  
pushing strollers down the walk way  
in their platform shoes and pastel minis,  
long black hair and long black eyes  
smiling back at them.

The sun scorching down on  
motorcycles and cars screeching at stop lights-  
city busses and taxis crowding the streets,  
the voices on the piazza-  
all offering better prices for spinach, tomatoes  
and such --they all want your attention.

Men whispering something about exchange rates  
as you walk by;  
on the street you can get Kunas  
for dollars and Deutchmarks.

Ladies selling cigarettes,  
Marlboro and Winston,  
Camel or Kool  
on all of the Piazza corners-  
even imported chocolate is cheaper  
if you buy it on the street.

Upon first glance

the palm trees and ocean front,  
beautiful faces and sea gulls  
can deceive the tourist eye  
and make it unbelievable  
that a war raged  
around the city--  
police hours, black outs  
and many dead young men,  
now in the shadows  
of the laughter and singing  
coming from taverns in old callas,  
lost in the aroma of grilled fish  
and steamed clams,  
roasted meat and fresh greens.

We could lie and say it never happened  
with summer on its way,  
the smell of lavender oil  
and rosemary leaves occupy the city --  
old men and women stroll arm in arm  
up Mt. Marjan's easy streets  
discussing christenings and communions  
and how much homemade wine they'll need  
for their parties.

Ferry boats wriggle into place  
at the marina  
and blow for their next tour to Brac or Hvar  
or even Ancona,  
when the war began  
and young people ran to Italy,  
the Ancona ferry was always full.

*A rainbow of scents  
reminds me of a million other times,  
past summers,  
how it used to be  
and just might be again--  
thinking about it from my window  
watching the afternoon  
in Split.*